ST. ANNE'S CHURCH, POPLAR POINT

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL
AFFAIRS AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Historic Resources Branch

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Minister

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ST. ANNE'S CHURCH, POPLAR POINT

St. Anne's Church, Poplar Point is one of the oldest log churches in western Canada. Built in 1864 under the guidance of Archdeacon William Cockran, it was one of a chain of Anglican parishes established along the Assiniboine River between 1855 and 1865. Located a little over three kilometres west of the town of Poplar Point, the church still stands solitary guard over a graveyard which includes many of the well-known names of Manitoba's earliest settlers.

The church and settlement at Poplar Point were largely a product of the work of the Church Missionary Society. Sponsored by the Church of England, the society dispatched several missionaries to the North-West in hope of establishing Christian settlements. One of those missionaries was the Reverend William Cockran.

In 1850 Cockran travelled westward from the Red River Settlement in search of a suitable location for a new mission. He selected a spot in the area of Portage la Prairie, and in 1851 took the first steps towards establishing a settlement. Over the next two years a number of families from Red River moved to the Portage community and the population slowly increased.

Reverend William Cockran

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The Portage settlement was not established without opposition. During the 1850s, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) still controlled a vast area of what became western Canada, and held exclusive trading rights in the region. Over the years their monopoly was seriously challenged by independent or "free" traders, who ventured into HBC territory to make their fortune. The company was concerned that Cockran's proposed settlement would become a base for the free traders as it was situated in an area outside of their direct control and, consequently, they opposed the project.

Despite this powerful opposition, the settlement survived and prospered. In 1855 St. Mary's Church was completed and Reverend Cockran accompanied a group of settlers from the parishes along the Red River to the Portage site. Prior to 1857, Cockran devoted most of his time to the parishes and Indian mission on the Red, but remained closely involved in the development of the western settlement. Unable to convince other clerics to take up the post at Portage, he returned to the area on a permanent basis in 1857.

With the completion of St. Mary's Church and the return of Archdeacon Cockran, Portage became a well-established community. The primarily Métis population increased rapidly and settlers began to farm the fertile sections of land between Portage and the Red River Settlement. By the end of the decade, St. Mary's could no longer accommodate all the people in the region, and church services were frequently held in settlers' homes. In 1859 the situation improved somewhat when William Cockran's son, Thomas, came out to assist his father. The arrival of Reverend Thomas Cockran not only facilitated the consolidation of the Anglican Church's work in the district, but also marked the beginning of St. Anne's Parish at Poplar Point.

A New Church at Poplar Point

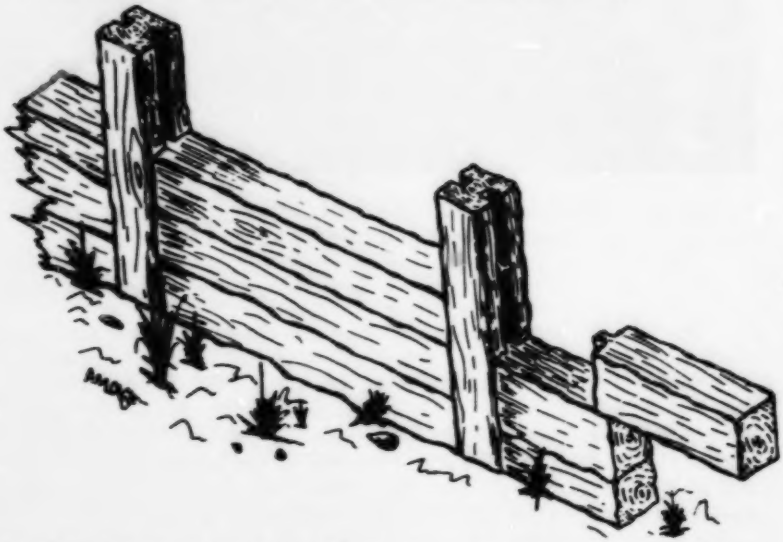
With the rapid increase in population between Headingly and Portage, Archdeacon Cockran sanctioned the erection of two new churches: St. Anne's at Poplar Point and St. Margaret's at High Bluff. Construction was financed in part by the Colonial and Continental Church Society, and Reverend Thomas Cockran was selected as minister.

Both St. Anne's and St. Margaret's were designed and built by local parishioners. Construction proceeded slowly because the volunteers had farms and homes to maintain and could only offer their services part time. St. Margaret's, located approximately thirteen kilometres east of St. Mary's, was built between 1861 and 1862, while St. Anne's, situated another thirteen kilometres beyond St. Margaret's, was constructed during the winter months of 1862, 1863 and 1864.

At St. Anne's the builders were supervised by a parishioner named Sanderson who had been trained as a carpenter. All the construction materials were donated by local people, and the community chose a simple design for their church. The building was to be an eight by sixteen metre, two-cell structure consisting of an assembly and tower.

St. Anne's Church was built in the "Red River frame" style, a form of construction popular throughout the North-West during this period.

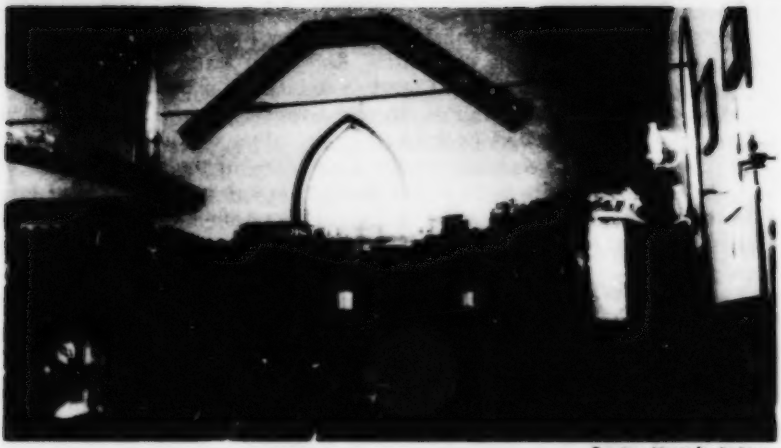
Also known as *pièces-sur-pièces*, the "French Canadian style," "Hudson Bay frame," post and fill construction and by the more technical term *pièces sur pièces à tenon en coulise*, Red River frame was introduced into the North-West by French Canadian fur traders in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was adopted by the Hudson's Bay Company and the settlers of the Red River Valley and became the main construction technique utilized in the area. Many of the original churches on the Red River were built in this style, although most were later torn down and replaced with stone structures. St. Anne's Church at Poplar Point is one of the last remaining Red River frame churches.



A schematic drawing of "Red River frame" or "post in ground" construction used at St. Anne's Church

In this form of construction, the sill plates and floor joists of the building were laid first, and then the vertical log posts of the wall frame were set in place. The horizontal logs that formed the walls were squared and the ends cut to form a tongue. One by one these logs were set into the grooves on the corner and intermediate vertical posts of the frame. Once the walls and floor were completed, the roof frame and roofing went up, the logs were chinked and the interior was finished.

All of the wood used in the construction of St. Anne's church was prepared by hand. The logs for the frame and walls were peeled and squared, while others were whipsawn into planks or cut into shingles. The basic structure was probably made from oak logs, while red willow provided lath for the prairie limestone plaster used on the walls. The entire building was covered by a gabled roof that had a slight overhang which helped to protect the wooden structure from water run-off.



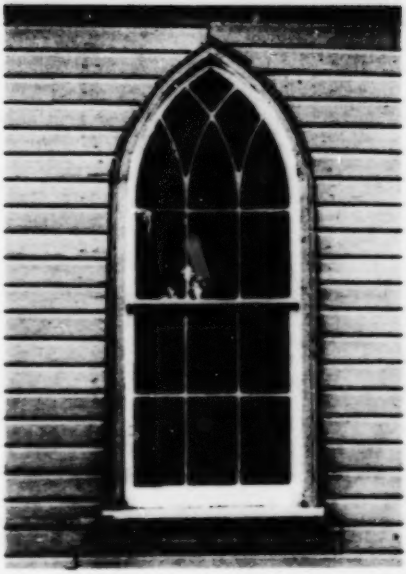
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A view of the interior of St. Anne's Church; note the scallop and fleur-de-lis design carvings at the top of the chancel.

The furniture and religious objects inside the church were also hand-made by local parishioners. Each family supplied lumber for their own pew, which included a kneeler and a book rest. The wooden altar rail, pulpit and collection box were all fashioned by hand and the base of the baptismal font was made from an oak log, painstakingly planed into shape. The stylized crosses along the top of the screen at the front of the church were carved with a jackknife and were smaller reproductions of the design found at the end of each pew.

One of the church pews made from wood donated by a local parishioner.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives



One of the "Gothic Revival" style windows at St. Anne's Church.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The church was finally completed and opened for services in 1864. Although the finished building displayed less elaborate ornamentation and detail than other Anglican churches at Red River, it was similar in design. Like St. Paul's Middlechurch on the Red, St. Anne's was constructed in the Gothic Revival style. This type of architecture was associated with the Church of England in the nineteenth century and symbolized the historical roots of Anglicanism. The castle-like bell-tower and the arched, pointed windows of St. Anne's Church are all evidence of the neo-Gothic influence.

The parishioners at St. Anne's eventually had the exterior of the church covered in cove drop siding, hoping to make the building more attractive. Although it hid the rough beauty of the log church, the siding did help to preserve the original structure. Since then, the exterior has remained virtually unchanged up to the present day.

In 1862, when the people of Poplar Point began to build their new church, they also requested a resident clergyman, and the Bishop of Rupert's Land agreed to send a minister on condition that the parishioners construct a parsonage. Eager to fulfill their obligations, the local people began to haul lumber for the clergyman's dwelling as early as 1862.

In October 1864 the Reverend John Chapman arrived at St. Anne's. Chapman was the first priest ordained in Rupert's Land by Bishop Anderson and was sent out to minister to both St. Anne's at Poplar Point and St. Margaret's at High Bluff. Although his residence was not completed, Chapman was able to hold his first service at St. Anne's Church on New Year's Day 1865.

St. Anne's still lacked one of the finishing touches that every pioneer church required — a bell. This problem was solved in 1871 when the Hudson's Bay Company donated one that had been used for time signals at York Factory. As the company was then in the process of relocating its fur trade headquarters, the bell was no longer of service and was shipped out by York boat via the Red and Assiniboine rivers to St. Anne's Church.

Changing Times

During the early years, St. Anne's parish experienced few changes. Clergymen came and went but the population of the farming community and parish remained relatively stable. What did act as a major catalyst to change was the arrival of the railway in the 1880s.

By August 1881 trains were running regularly from Portage to Winnipeg. When the Canadian Pacific Railway was built through the Poplar Point area, the company located a depot at Deep Creek, some three kilometres east of the village, parish hall and school near St. Anne's Church. The trains stopped at Deep Creek to take on water for the locomotives and, in time, passengers were encouraged to disembark there for rest and refreshments. As the practice developed, the village at St. Anne's gradually began to relocate closer to Deep Creek to take advantage of this new source of business.

The trip from Winnipeg to Portage, which had once taken several days by boat or ox cart, now took only five hours and forty minutes by train. With this new and faster mode of transportation, settlement of the West proceeded rapidly, and the village of Poplar Point steadily expanded.

In 1912 the parish hall of St. Mary's was moved to Poplar Point Village and at this time there was some debate as to whether or not the church should also be moved. A major consideration was the condition of the structure. Despite repairs done on the building during the ministry of Reverend T. Goggs, 1887-1895, the Bishop of Rupert's Land felt that the church was not strong enough to withstand the move. As his decision was final, St. Anne's Church remained at its original site.

Major repairs were made on the church during the 1930s. Over a five year period between 1934 and 1939, Reverend Henry Cartilidge directed renovations. As the base logs around the church were infested with wood rot caused by poor drainage, they were removed and a cement foundation poured. Hand forged iron tie-rods were used to pull in and brace the walls which had started to slide outwards, and the church tower was shifted fifteen centimetres back into line with the rest of the building. Finally, a new false floor was installed, although this buckled eventually because of the poor condition of the log supports.

Coal oil lamps serviced the church until 1962 and wood stoves until 1964. These were replaced by electric lighting and heating. In spite of such modern additions, the overall appearance of the church did not significantly alter over the years.

The size of the congregation at St. Anne's Church has also remained

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The wooden stoves that once heated St. Anne's Church.

relatively constant over time, consistently serving between forty-five to sixty-five families. The extent of St. Anne's land holdings has diminished, however. In 1896 the original holding of 100 acres was reduced to ninety, and today the parish retains only five acres of land.

St. Anne's outlived both its sister churches, St. Mary's at Portage and St. Margaret's at High Bluff. Although it now stands alone, well outside the community of Poplar Point, it continues to serve the local people. The names carved on the gravestones that surround St. Anne's remain as a reminder of its pioneer past: Brown, Bruce, Fidler, Inkster, Cook, Hunt, Tate, Taylor and Waite. Almost one hundred and twenty years old and still in continuous use, the log church reflects both the faith of Manitoba's first pioneers and the continuity of the Anglican Church in Manitoba.

Suggestions for Further Reading

An excellent source on the work of the Anglican Church in the West is T.C. Boon's, *The Anglican Church from the Bay to the Rockies* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1962). Primary documents pertaining to St. Anne's Church can be found at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba in the *Church Missionary Society Papers* or at the Public Archives of Canada in the *Colonial and Continental Church Society Correspondence*. A certain amount of information on Poplar Point and St. Anne's Church can also be found in the following volumes: Ann Collier, *A History of Portage la Prairie and Surrounding District* (Winnipeg, 1933); A.C. Garrioch, *The Connection Line* (Winnipeg, 1933) and *First Furrows* (Winnipeg, 1923).

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A view of St. Anne's Church and cemetery.

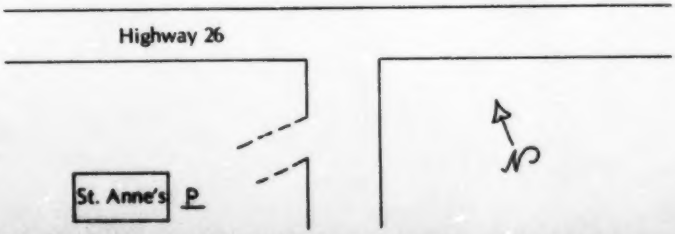
Credits

The cover photograph of St. Anne's Church is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Archives.

The Historic Resources Branch would like to thank Vera Fast for her contribution to the preparation of this publication.

ST. ANNE'S CHURCH
St. Anne's completed in 1864, is one of the oldest log churches in continuous use in Western Canada. Built through the efforts of Archdeacon Cockran, founder of the Church of England Missions in the Assiniboine Valley, its first incumbant was Rev. John Chapman. Before St. Anne's was built settlers who had migrated from the parishes of St. Andrews, St. Paul's and St. James' on the Red and lower Assiniboine rivers worshipped in Portage la Prairie or in farm houses in this district.
THE HISTORIC SITES ADVISORY BOARD OF MANITOBA

This plaque is located five kilometres west of Poplar Point just off Highway 26 and in front of St. Anne's Church.



OUR HERITAGE

We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland, the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province, a site that is part of history.

POOR

QUALITY

ORIGINAL